THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

The Spendthriftiness of Love
October 10, 1999

John M. Buchanan

When we consider that our time and our talent are the greatest gifts that we have, we understand them rightly to be our treasure, that precious cargo we are privileged to bear in this world.... Jesus warned that we will be judged not on how much we have, or even how much we get or give, but on how wisely and well we use what we have in the time that we have. God has great expectations; so too must we.... The gifts that you have do not belong to you; they are not yours to possess but rather yours to improve, and if you do not, you will lose them.

Peter Gomes
Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living
"Time , Talent and Treasure"

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THE SPENDTHRIFTINESS OF LOVE

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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Genesis 1:26-28
Matthew 25:14-30

"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them." Matthew 25:14

Dear God, we come here with much on our minds and hearts. Some of us are worried, some of us frightened, others are anxious. Some of us are in love; some of us are in grief. Some are angry, some are happy to be alive this morning; others wonder what life is all about.

But we're here—together—and we ask you to bless our being here and to use this time to speak the word you have for each of us.

Startle us with the immediacy and personal relevance of that word for our lives, and in your mercy, help us to know again your love in Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the spring of 1984, Tom Brokaw was sent to the northwest of France, to Normandy, to prepare an NBC documentary on the 40th anniversary of D-Day. He did his homework; researched the military planning, the numbers of men, ships, airplanes and weapons, the German defenses, the names of the French villages. What he was not prepared for, he said, was the way the experience would affect him emotionally.

He writes:

> "I was simply looking forward to what I thought would be an interesting assignment in the part of France celebrated for its hospitality, its seafood and its Calvados, the local brandy made from apples. . . . Instead, I underwent a life-changing experience. As I walked the beaches with American veterans who had landed there—men in their 60's and 70's, and listened to their stories, I was deeply moved and profoundly grateful for all they had done." (XVII-XIX)

And so Brokaw went to work on a book which he called *The Greatest Generation.* It's about the men and women who came of age in the Great Depression, watched their parents lose their jobs, farms, their hopes, and just when there was a glimmer of hope, were summoned to the parade ground to train for war. They left their ranches in South Dakota, their jobs on main street in Georgia, their place on the assembly line in Detroit, and in the ranks of Wall Street, they quit school. They answered the call to help save the world from the two most powerful and ruthless military machines ever assembled.

And they did it. They fought in the most primitive conditions from France to Italy to the islands of the South Pacific. Women went to work in new ways in business and industry and in the military. And when it was over, they went to work, they married, gave birth to the Baby Boomers.

> **"They became part of the greatest investment in higher education any society ever made--the GI bill . . . they gave the world new art and literature. They came to understand the need for civil rights legislation. They gave America Medicare." (XXX)**

And now they are at the end of their lives. Brokaw respects and admires them. He writes,

> **"Most of all, they love each other, love life and love their country, and they are not ashamed to say just that." (XXX)**

It is almost as if they discovered something very important, something very costly: namely that having something you believe in passionately and love deeply enough to call you to real sacrifice, enough to die for, brings a depth to life, a sense of life's value and preciousness, a profound and deep gratitude for the gift of life and time, a sense of wholeness and peace and fulfillment.

It reminds me of something Douglas John Hall wrote, and he has written a lot of good things. But this, I believe, is my favorite:

> **"Jesus saves. He saves us <u>for</u> life, for giving ourselves over to its joys and sorrows, to predictable and unpredictable occurrences, its routines and surprises. He saves us <u>from</u> the awful habit we have of saving ourselves, of sparing our energies, of protecting our minds and souls and bodies from the life struggle. He saves us for the spendthriftiness of love." (*Professing the Faith)***

One time Jesus told a story about that. I think it is among the more haunting things he ever said. He told it at the end of his own life, at the very moment that Judas was planning to betray him and his enemies were conspiring to arrest him and do away with him.

It's a familiar story about a man who is planning to go on a long journey. Could those who heard this story initially not have known immediately what that meant? That he was the man and they were the servants who are about to be given major responsibility?

The man summons his servants, distributes his property among them, and gives them responsibility for its management. Another good word for what he gives them, by the way, is stewardship.

The servant who received five talents invested, traded, and doubled his money. He obviously took some chances!

The servant who received two talents did the same thing—invested, risked, and doubled his money.

The one who received one talent was more cautious and prudent. You need someone like this fellow on your Board of Trustees. He takes no chances. In an interesting twist in the story, Rabbinical law provided that if you do what he did—bury someone else's money in the ground, you are no longer liable for it because you have done the safest thing. (See Eduard Schweizer, *Matthew,* p.471)

So the master returns—is delighted with servant number one and number 2, is lavish with his praise:

> "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master."

That's a funny definition of trustworthiness, is it not? These fellows took real risks. You don't double your investment by playing conservatively. Everyone knows that—you must be willing to risk losing it all. The man might have said, "Well done, courageous slave;" or "foolish slave," or "well done very lucky slave." But good and trustworthy? I don't think so.

Slave number 3, the member of the Board of Trustees, the prudent, cautious conservative, proudly presents this man with his money in tact: no gains, no losses, no risks. And the response is astonishingly harsh. You might expect the man to say something like, "Well, ok. You did what you could. You followed your best instincts. You were admirably cautious and respectful of my property." Instead, the response is almost violent—"You wicked, lazy slave—take the money from him and throw him out into the street."

Jesus was not hesitant to use money to teach about value. He did it many times, actually. And here, the issue is value—not simply the money. In one of the commentaries I read on the text this time around there was a warning to the preacher, which said in effect—if you use this story for a stewardship sermon, do not make the mistake of telling your people that what Jesus really wants from them is a 4.5% increase in their pledge. The issue is far more important than that. The issue is the value of life—theirs and yours.

Well, it is stewardship season and we are talking about budgets and percentages. And I have chosen to put this text in front of us because I believe the issue of stewardship is essentially the issue of you and me knowing and appreciating the value of our lives and deciding to be responsible about how to use them, invest them.

It's about money but it's about far more than money. You have probably heard the story about an airplane full of passengers, and the pilot came on the intercom and said, "Folks, I've got bad news. We're running out of fuel and we have to make a crash landing." Everyone gasped and a voice from the back said "Someone do something religious!" The Catholics on board started to cross themselves and look for their rosaries. The Baptists started to pray. The Methodists broke out into a hymn. The Presbyterians organized a committee and launched a stewardship campaign.

It's about money but it's about more than money. If it's only about money we should, a mentor of mine once said, "raffle Pontiacs." My favorite, however, was advice given me by a stewardship committee chairperson in another church, who knew a little church history and had a sense of humor. "Couldn't we bring back indulgences?" he used to ask me. Indulgences were sold by the Catholic church—for a fee you could reduce your time in Purgatory, and be forgiven of your sins. Indulgences were transferable. You could buy them for your relatives. The sale of Indulgences sent Martin Luther over the edge when a Papal salesman, by the name of Tetzel, set up shop in Wittenburg, beating a drum and calling out, "Every time a penny falls on the drum, a soul from purgatory flies." "Couldn't we do something like that?" Bob used to ask. "Couldn't you just once, cross your fingers and stand up in the pulpit and say it? 'Raise your pledge and you'll go to heaven. Really raise it and you can take your friends with you. Don't pledge and you're done for!' I know it would work," Bob used to say.

The issue here is the value of your life and how you will appreciate and use it. And yes, part of that, a very important and tangible part, is how much you are willing to give away to what you believe in. But it is also bigger and deeper than money alone.

Again, Douglas John Hall, in a book on stewardship, writes that instead of begging people to give, we need to learn how to preach and teach the gospel and interpret the gospel and interpret the Christian life as stewardship. (*The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age)*

A distinguished Presbyterian pastor, E. C. Ennis, writes that stewardship is analogous to conversion. It means learning to see the world and one's own life in a whole new way. (*Journal for Preachers, Lent 98).* And that, according to Jesus, begins with knowing how valuable our own lives are and then managing them, investing them, giving them away responsibly.

It is a major biblical theme—human responsibility—human stewardship. One of the most remarkable things that God says in the creation story is: You're in charge—take responsibility for the garden, for the creation, name the animals and plants—use them—manage wisely and faithfully. "Have dominion." And if we can get past our obsession with sex and sexual sin as the only sin God really cares about, we will see that what goes wrong in the Garden of Eden has nothing to do with sex, and everything in the world to do with responsibility. The original couple refuses to be responsible. They won't obey the rules, and when they're caught, Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the snake. The original sin in the Bible is irresponsibility: the failure to take seriously the value of their own lives and the plans God has for them.

It is an important idea, theologically. One of the traditional seven deadly sins is "Sloth," the refusal to care, the refusal to live, the refusal to be all one can be, the unwillingness to be responsible.

Sloth has a social and political dimension as well as a personal one. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said somewhere that the sin of respectable people is the refusal to be responsible for the world, to simply stop caring. And political scientists and historians know that the

abdication of the individual and individual responsibility is the prelude always to tyranny.

Victims of totalitarianism know it. Bonhoeffer taught that the Christian ethic is simply being involved and exercising responsibility for the life of the community and nation. And he died for that conviction.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, exiled from the Soviet Union, said "Mankind's sole salvation lies in everyone making everything his business." And Vaclav Havel told our Congress, "The salvation of the human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart . . . in human responsibility."

I loved something Secretary of State Madeline Albright said about whether or not to commit American troops to peacekeeping missions. Speaking at the Harvard Commencement, in the midst of the raging political debate about the pros and cons of American involvement:

> "We will be known as the world-class ditherers who stood by while the seeds of renewed global conflict were sown, or as the generation that took strong measures to forge alliances, deter aggression, and keep the peace. Ultimately it is a matter of judgment, a question of choice."

The biggest issue for everyone of us is the matter of how to use our lives, our resources, our money, our skills and talents, and our time; how faithfully and fully to invest and use whatever time we have left.

George Bernard Shaw in *Man and Superman* wrote:

> "This is the true joy of life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.
>
> I want to be thoroughly used up when I did, for the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no 'brief candle' to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

I spent most of last weekend at my 40th college reunion, and there is nothing like that experience to bring the issue into focus.

At a 40th reunion there is a lot of talk about surgery, and aches and pains and retirement and what in the world to do after you've seen your grandchildren and played enough golf. It is a bit of a generalization I know, but the best of it for me was reconnecting with the Yale heart surgeon who said, "I have so much invested in learning how to do this and I'm so good at it, that I'm going to continue to do it until my hands and eyes wear out." And the senior executive who took early retirement from UNISYS and got bored and started a new company and invented a new software product for mortgage banks and is busier and

happier than ever, and the insurance executive who lost his beloved wife, whom we all knew and loved, and somehow put it all back together and married his wife's best friend and is alive and well.

Gomes said it beautifully:

> " . . . our time and our talents are our greatest gifts . . . Jesus warned that we will be judged not on how much we have, but on how wisely and well we use what we have in the time that we have. God has great expectations; so too must we . . ."

Did you ever read or see Thornton Wilder's *Our Town?* In that classic, young Emily has died and has returned for a visit. Before she leaves again, she says some lines that are as poignant as any in all of literature:

> "Good bye, good bye world. Good bye Grover's Corner . . . Mama and Papa. Good bye to clocks ticking . . . and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new ironed dresses and hot baths . . . and sleeping and waking up. Oh earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. (She looks for the stage manager and asks abruptly) Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? Every, every minute? And the stage manager replies, No. The saints and poets, maybe, they do some.
>
> And Emily responds, Saints and poets, who are they if not ordinary mortals like you and me? Like them, we possess the power to paint the town, transfigure the day."

That is the issue. We have one life to live. All we really have—each one of us—is time, a lot or a little, and the gifts of God, our skills, our talents, our love. And the issue is not to protect or conserve or keep it all safe, but to use it, to invest it, to risk it all, to give it all away, and to know and to hear those blessed words—

Well done—well done. Amen.

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
PASTORAL PRAYER
TOM ROOK
October 10, 1999

Holy God, Lord and giver of life, we do thank you for the breath of life, given to us through your pure grace and love alone—our first breath a gift, and even now each breath that we take—each a gift. O God, how can we ever repay, or if not repay, how can we live in light of such a gift?

And so we thank you, gracious God, that you have sent One ahead of us, One who shows us the way of life—the way to life—One who brings us to you, by a pathway of gratitude that shows your love, a gratitude that lives your love.

Keep us on this path of thankfulness, O Lord. Let it become for us our way of living. Let gratitude become our way of appreciating life, our way of seeing others—gratitude our way of experiencing you, our God, our life.

And so we do thank you today. We thank you for all those who are faithful and diligent in the duties of life, and who thereby bless our lives.

We thank you for all those who work to perform jobs that support the intricate life of the city—for salespeople, for bus drivers, bankers and secretaries, for those who prepare our food and those who serve it, for doormen and for health care workers, for those who clean our streets and our homes.

We thank you for teachers in the classroom who care for our children—caring for their minds and for their character, teachers who live out qualities of fairness and honesty and high expectation of their students.

We thank you for adult children who now care for their parents, or for their brother or sister, who need their help, day by day. We thank you for members of this church—Stephen Ministers, Caring Connectors, and others—who give of their time and emotional energy to attend to the needs of others.

To all of these who shoulder life's duties—routinely, reliably, faithfully—we pray your encouragement, O God. You who did your creative work in six days and proclaimed it good and then sought rest, grant refreshment to those who give days and nights of devotion to their jobs, their studies, their care of others. Grant them wisdom to find times and spaces in their lives to pause and sense your own care of them.

And then, O God, nurture within us all, the character of Christ himself.

Give us courage to face suffering and danger.
Give us boldness to uphold what is right.
Give us endurance to withstand the disappointments of life.
Give us forgiveness toward those who have wronged us.
And give us hearts thankful toward you, O God.

Now, trusting in your love, which securely holds us forever, we pray in the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, saying together, Our Father . . .